

HOMILY FOR THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (10 Matthew).

By Father Filip Lommaert

St. Matthew. (17:14-23)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading we hear how Christ, our Lord, and Saviour, defines the strength of our faith as the main weapon needed to bring victory over evil.

Our faith is not just an object, a lifeless thing. It is not a stone, or even a precious stone, like a diamond, which, though beautiful and very expensive, is still a dead thing without feelings and senses.

Christ teaches us that our faith must be similar to a mustard seed: though it is tiny, it is a living thing. This small seed, given good ground and enough water, will grow into a big and beautiful tree, with strong and long roots anchoring the tree into the ground, so that it can withstand rain and wind.

This is what must happen to our faith. It must always grow and develop and it must get strong foundations.

Christ tells us that if we only have faith that is the size of a mustard seed, mountains would retreat in front of us, and we would be able to move them from place to place.

But how do we go about strengthening our faith? The Lord tells His disciples that prayer and fasting are the most powerful means to strengthen their faith. And this is also valid for all of us.

But, do we really need to physically move mountains from one place to another with our faith?

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was not talking about physical mountains in this parable. The mountains He was talking about were the mountains which are in our hearts. The mountains which have been built from sins and pride, accumulated during our lives.

Those are the mountains that keep us separated from God. Those are the mountains we need to move. Those are the mountains we have to move out of our hearts.

But, what is this faith, Jesus Christ our Lord is talking about?

First of all, we should not confuse faith with belief. Belief is presented to us in words, concepts, and creeds. They are valuable, but they have very little to do with faith.

Faith is none of these things. Faith cannot be achieved just through hard work. It is not something we can convince ourselves to be beyond all doubt.

Faith demands nothing of God. Faith, just like love, has only one desire: To give. We love God because He loved us first. We can love others because God has poured the gift of love in our hearts. Every good thing is a gift.

We already have what we seek in us. Everything, from its inception to its end, is a gift from the all-compassionate God who comes to us and lives within and among us, for the kingdom of heaven is not only “within us”, but in the “midst of us.”

We recognise that the Lord, by taking on human flesh and uniting it to His Divinity has accomplished redemption for the entire human race, although the majority still awaits that special, enlivening grace which comes through the action of the Holy Spirit in Baptism.

In Orthodoxy, we talk about God as being fundamentally unintelligible. It is impossible to see, feel, or know Him with our senses. We can only try to describe Him through negations.

This theology is called apophatic or negative theology. The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers stated a belief in the existence of God, but an existence unlike that of everything else: everything else that exists was created, but the Creator transcends this existence, He is uncreated.

The essence of God is completely unknowable; mankind can know God only through His energies. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.395), John Chrysostom (c. 349 – 407), and Basil the Great (329-379) emphasised the importance of negative theology to an orthodox understanding of God.

John of Damascus (c.675/676–749) employed negative theology when he wrote that positive statements about God reveal "not the nature, but the things around the nature."

Vladimir Lossky argues, based on his reading of Dionysius and Maximus Confessor, that positive theology is always inferior to negative theology.

According to Lossky, outside of directly revealed knowledge through Scripture and Sacred Tradition, such as the Trinitarian nature of God, God in His essence is beyond the limits of what human beings (or even angels) can understand.

Faith is what happens when we meet with God. And it is beyond words and human concepts. It is the result of a personal, heartfelt encounter with the living God. Faith is a gift given by God to those who have purified their hearts, to those who have learned how to sit at His feet in silence.

Faith, is a return to the truth of who we are as human beings: created in His image and likeness.

Faith is released in us from the depths of our souls when we have taken out everything that obstructs and prevents us from meeting Him. And what does obstruct or prevent us from meeting Him? Our sins, our pride, our envy, our self-reliance, our attachment to money, and the material world.

True faith simply knows that the goodness of the Lord overflows at all times to all creation whether times are good or bad, whether they are happy or sad. “To live is Christ, to die is Christ,” wrote St. Paul. That is all we need.

How do we achieve faith?

The answer is simple: Through prayer and fasting.

Prayer is not talking about God, it is talking with God. And fasting is not some form of dieting, such as we are bombarded with on television and in magazines. Fasting is abstaining from the things of the body to draw nearer to the things of the soul.

Prayer and fasting are the deepening of faith. The Fathers of the Church call prayer and fasting a 'two-edged sword'. In other words, where there is prayer and fasting, there is faith. And as St Theophan the Recluse wrote: "Where there is no prayer and fasting, there are the demons".

Referring to these words of St Theophan, we could say that the modern world in which we live now has become the dwelling place of demons. Why? Because the modern world mocks and shuns prayer and fasting.

And because the world has become a place devoid of prayer and fasting, it seems that each new day brings us news of new disasters, killings, misery, and poverty, to name but a few.

On the other hand, where there is faith, there is prayer and fasting, and there the demons cannot go. All is possible if there is faith. Faith moves mountains. We have the words of Christ in today's gospel reading.

Moreover, where there is no faith, there is no hope but despair. And where there is no hope, there is no love but hatred. And where there is neither faith nor hope nor love, there you will not find the mother of these three virtues, Wisdom. Instead, you will find foolishness.

For who is Wisdom? Wisdom is the Wisdom of God, the Wisdom of the Word of God: Wisdom is Christ. So where there is no Christ, there is no Wisdom and where there is no wisdom, there is neither love, nor hope, nor faith.

The land of no faith, no hope, no love, and no Wisdom is unfortunately where the world we live in is heading to, unless we change its direction. It is not too late. Today's Gospel has made this clear. It is all about faith. So, let us have faith, and pray and fast.

Amen.